

Westmount Lodge No. 671

April 24th, 2007

Lecture

Where is our Fraternity Heading?

Brethren, today's increase in initiations seen across the province, together with a rapidly increasing 27% drop-out rate reported by Grand Lodge, makes us wonder about the future of our Fraternity. What can we do to make sure that all those new Masons are going to continue coming to Lodge? How are we going to manage to keep them interested in our beloved Craft?

When we complain of lack of attendance, what we really are saying is that interest is at a low ebb, for in any organization, if there is interest, there will be attendance. No amount of television or curling or golfing can surpass the position of eminence a Lodge of Freemasons occupies in a man's loyalty if the Lodge is in a position to earn his loyalty.

What if we are looking at the symptoms in stead of the disease? Could it be that the real source of the trouble is within ourselves?

One of the first responsibilities the Master of the Lodge gives to the candidate after receiving a degree is to memorize a set of questions and answers, and to learn his obligation by heart. Titles of books may be recommended for his leisure reading and personal contemplation. The Master asks him to attend regularly and to prepare himself to the best of his ability. But is this enough? Are we truly soothing his afflictions and relieving his necessities? Do we even know what these are?

On the positive side, I must say the history of Freemasonry is one of ups and downs. If this brief period is one of the "downs," it is nothing compared to some of the crises through which our Fraternity has passed. We at least can see light at the end of the tunnel.

Attendance has always been a problem throughout history. Yes, in the 1920's and 1930's men were joining the Craft by the hundreds each year, but Master of the Lodge had to work their heads off to sustain interest and attendance. Sometimes they succeeded; sometimes they didn't. Even as far back as the 1930's, records indicate problems with the number of Brethren attending the Lodge on regular basis. The situation is no different today; nor will it be different tomorrow and the day after.

What we need to do is to take corrective measures which go beyond the surface; they must go to the roots of the problem. We need to identify the problem and attack it directly and effectively.

Let's take an honest look at some of the conditions within our own Lodges, which may be contributing to a membership decline and a loss of interest.

First of all; there is nothing wrong with your Lodge, nor with Freemasonry, that good leadership will not cure." I believe that the Number One responsibility for any decline in membership, any lack of interest and attendance, rests squarely upon the shoulders of our

Lodge leadership. The heads of the Masonic Lodges in our communities can not afford to be careless, sloppy and crude. They need to prepare themselves well for every meeting and MAKE SURE that his officers and members of the degree team are also well prepared. Well attended practices and rehearsals are a good way to make sure.

I would a thousand times rather see as Master of a Lodge a man who can provide real leadership, a man who can give “good and wholesome instruction,” a man who comprehends what Freemasonry is all about, even if he can not confer a single degree. What if he can not recite the ritual? So what! There always are those who are eager and willing to do ritualistic work, but there are only precious few who can provide inspired leadership.

We must pay more attention to proficiency of the work in general, but we must pay more attention to proficiency in the East in particular. Our book of the work is clear, direct, easy to read.. Why is it that so many Lodges do not follow the simple instructions clearly listed in the book? We make a great to-do over proficiency of candidates. We want to hear the candidates do the work well done. But we do little or nothing to insure proficiency where it really counts. At the beginning of my term, I indicated to the Grand Master that one of my objectives for my year was to see that the ritual work was being done properly in our District. The openings, the closings, the call-offs, the floor work, and the degree work itself. In my travels this year as DDGM, inside and out side our District, I have seen work being done in many Lodges that actually left a lot to be desired. In particular the floor work. The different ways in which the Lodge is open and closed. The time at which the tools are changed or put away. The turning off of the lights. Even the closing of the Book of the Sacred Law. The thought always comes to mind; didn't they read the book? In that little black book everything is explained step by step. Is it too much to ask a Master of a Lodge to make sure the officers of his Lodge are doing the work by the book? I say, no. We need to learn to follow the ritual as it is explained to us. Many Lodges operate by long standing traditions in the way they do their work. But do those traditions agree with the established norm? Wouldn't it be easier if the officers of the Lodge and those involved in the degree work take a look at the book and follow it step by step? Quality begins with the leaders of the Lodge. That's why they are the leaders of the Lodge because they are expected to lead.

Another issue we need to look at is how well we are guarding the West Gate? Again, let's face it. Are we permitting too many to pass through the West Gate who can pay the fee and little else? I personally know a few.

Has Freemasonry become too easy to obtain? Fees for initiation are ridiculously low; annual dues are far too low. Again, records indicate that in times past, when membership in Ontario was high, initiation fees were as much as one month wages for a regular man. Today is only a week's worth and in some cases, it is only a couple of days. Today everything is geared to speed - getting through as fast as possible and on to something else. The Lodge demands little and gets little. It expects loyalty, but does almost nothing to put a claim on a man's loyalty. When we ourselves place a cheap value on Masonic membership, how can we expect petitioners and new members to prize it? Well, it seems as if two of the results are low attendance and high drop-out rates.

Another important point is the “Box of Benevolence” which once occupied the central position in every Lodge room has been replaced by an annual per capita tax. That charity, which for ages was one of the sweetest by-products of the teachings of our gentle Craft, has ceased to be a gift from the heart and has become, for many, the writing of a cheque for an income tax receipt. Unless the personal element is there, charity becomes phoney and meaningless. Charity is about true giving for nothing in return.

Today we live in a Century of Equality which has contributed to making our Fraternity a little too common? We can not expect to retain the prestige the Craft has enjoyed in the past if we continue to permit, without challenge, the standards of the picnic ground, the pubs, the private club and the golf courses to be brought into the Lodge Hall. Whether we like it or not, a general lowering of standards has left its mark on many Lodges; large and small. The other night, during one of my fraternal visits, I had the sad experience of listening to a brother use such profane and vulgar language inside the Lodge room during a call-off that, I guarantee you, if that behaviour would have been demonstrated in my classroom at school by any of my teenage students, I would have most definitely sent that student to the principals office for a detention. I admit, it was very difficult to approach that brother and advise him about his conduct. He is a ground up man, a so called Mason. The worst part of it is that, while he spoke in such rude and vulgar manner, an E.A. was sitting next to him. I truly felt sorry and embarrassed at the same time for the E.A. What kind of lesson did he learn that evening? He must have been confused. I believe apologies are at hand.

What has become of that “course of moral instruction, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols,” that Freemasonry is supposed to be? If it is a course of instruction, then there should be teachers, and if ours is a progressive science, then the teaching of a Master Mason should not end when he is raised. I am not talking about dry, professorial lectures or sermons – Of course not! That is the kind of thing that makes Masonic education so boring. What I am talking about is the parables and allegories illustrated by our Craft? How do we apply Masonry into our daily lives? Or is it that all those tenets and principles have descended into booklets and into the pockets of our coats, and left there to be forgotten and ignored. No wonder interest is so hard to sustain?

Finally, my Brethren, I leave you with this thought. The future of Freemasonry in Ontario is in our hands. The future of Freemasonry begins each day as we rise to face a new day. It begins in the heart and mind of every one of us sitting here tonight. As far as I see it, we only have two choices; are we going to be a part of the problem or are we going to be a part of the solution? Brethren it is up to us. Let us all get on board and make this Noble Order what it was meant to be in the first place.

Written by:

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